

ILLINOIS ENGLISH BULLETIN

Official Publication of the Illinois Association of Teachers of English

Vol. 40, No. 2

Urbana, Illinois

November, 1952

Published every month except June, July, August, and September. Subscription price, \$2.00 per year; single copies, 25 cents. Entered as second-class matter October 29, 1941, at the post office at Urbana, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Communications may be addressed to J. N. Hook, 121 Lincoln Hall, Urbana, Illinois.

The Basic Skills of Reading

By

JOSEPHINE A. PIEKARZ

Skill in reading is even more essential to academic success at the secondary school and college levels than it is in the elementary grades. Yet until rather recently little attention was directed toward providing planned reading instruction at these higher educational levels. The teaching of reading was felt to lie exclusively within the domain of the elementary grades, or perhaps even within the first three or four years of a child's formal education. It is recognized and accepted now that individuals do not adequately learn to read in this brief period, but that they do and should increase their reading power through the college level. Yearly a growing number of secondary schools and colleges are organizing reading programs to help students at these levels to read better.

Certain principles are common to reading at all stages of development. In mature students they differ more in degree of complexity than in kind. This paper will discuss four basic skills that are essential to reading at all levels of development, namely word recognition, vocabulary, comprehension, and rate.

Word Recognition

Since words are the carriers of meaning, it is essential that the reader acquire the skills necessary for quick and accurate word recognition. If he is to grasp the relationships among words that convey the ideas, the reader must eventually become adept at recog-

What are the problems in the improvement of reading that persist through the elementary, secondary, and college levels? Miss Piekarz, who is Assistant Director of the Reading Clinic, Department of Education, University of Chicago, analyzes in nontechnical language the four problems that are probably most important.

nizing words at sight or be able to analyze readily those words that are not a part of his sight vocabulary.

The good reader is skillful in applying various techniques to identify words. He uses these techniques alone or in different combinations in his attempts to analyze words accurately. He may recognize a word by its general appearance. He notes distinguishing characteristics and remembers them just as he learns to recognize his friends because one is short, another tall, and so on.

He also uses contextual clues. An unknown word may be no handicap if the reader is acquainted with the subject about which he is reading. As he reads with understanding, a word which he has never previously met in print gives away its identity because it is the only word which will make sense in that particular place. Guessing at words from contextual clues is highly desirable when used in conjunction with other techniques and should be taught and encouraged.

Picture clues are another aid that are used to advantage by the alert reader. Text books, as well as recreatory reading books, are abundantly and well illustrated at the present time. Pupils should be taught to search pictures carefully for clues to the identification of unknown words.

Phonetic and structural analysis are "musts" for independence in word recognition. Phonetic analysis involves the association of appropriate sounds with printed word forms. However, since there are more sounds in the spoken language than letter symbols in the corresponding printed language, pupils cannot attack words effectively simply by responding with a particular sound when they see a certain letter or combination of letters. Instead they must learn the phonetic elements of the language and the proper application of them.

Single consonant letters used to represent single consonant sounds are at the more elementary level and are usually learned in the early stages of developing independence in word recognition. The pupil must also learn the two and three consonant combinations used to represent consonant sounds in a series; e.g., *br*, *fl*, *scr*. These are often blended so closely that it is difficult to separate the sounds. The special two-letter consonant symbols used to represent single consonant sounds must also be mastered. The good reader soon learns to react to *ch*, *sh*, and *th* as units in themselves and not as two separate letters, each with a distinguishable sound.

There are, moreover, certain vowel elements that are essential to the mastery of phonetic analysis. A single vowel sound may be produced by a single vowel letter or by two vowel letters. In addi-

tion, diphthongs are used to represent two vowel sounds blended to form one speech sound as *oi* in *oil*. The substitution of one phonetic element for another is one of the simplest ways of unlocking new words. Skill in substituting initial and final consonant elements enables the reader to derive the pronunciation of whole groups of words from one known word, recognized as a sight word.

When words of more than one syllable are considered, the principles of syllabication become important. To pronounce a word of more than one syllable, the reader must not only identify the separate syllables, but must blend the syllables into a whole word with the appropriate accent. For this reason phonetic analysis should be used in conjunction with other means of word attack.

Structural analysis is one of its closest allies; that is, the identification of parts of a word which form meaning or pronunciation units within the word. In this way roots, prefixes, and suffixes are identified, and inflected forms of words are easily recognized. Structural analysis also includes the identification of two known words within compound words. If *school* and *house* are each recognized separately by the reader, they should present no challenge as *schoolhouse*. The two types of analysis, structural and phonetic, go hand in hand. But real independence in attacking words of more than one syllable hinges upon developing skill in structural analysis.

The techniques of word attack discussed thus far can only be applied effectively to words that are within the pupil's speaking-meaning vocabulary. When a reader analyzes a word and finally pronounces it, he knows whether it is a sensible word or not. However, the time comes when the reader encounters a word in his reading which is outside his speaking vocabulary. He does not know, when he finishes analyzing it, whether it is a real word or not. Under these circumstances he should be proficient in using the dictionary to associate sound and meaning with the word form. The reason so many pupils fail to use the dictionary is that they never have been taught to use it efficiently. Such pupils are unable to locate words rapidly, they are ineffective in deciphering the diacritical marks, and are unable to select the appropriate meaning to fit the particular context in which words are found. The dictionary can and should serve the reader as a permanent aid to word recognition.

Teachers at all levels must contribute to the development of effective word recognition skills. A well-organized and thorough program along these lines is not completed by the end of grade three, but extends upward through the secondary school level. The reader acquires greater competency in the various skills and learns

to use them as checks upon each other. Only in this way can he be sure to recognize words accurately and grasp the meaning intended by the author.

Vocabulary

A meaningful vocabulary is basic to growth in reading, for there is usually a positive relationship between the extent and richness of an individual's vocabulary and his general reading achievement. The reader can grasp meaning only through the words he knows. There is sufficient evidence to show that progress in reading is more rapid when nearly all the words used in the reading material are within the pupil's meaning vocabulary and relate to familiar experiences. The acquisition of a vocabulary adequate for reading and thinking effectively is the product of many years of personal experiences and opportunities with language symbols. The more varied the reader's first-hand and vicarious experiences are, the more meaningful his reading becomes.

Vocabulary growth is very rapid in the early years of a person's life, but the growth curve decelerates with chronological age unless special attention is directed toward enriching it. If an active curiosity about words is developed on the part of the pupil, vocabulary gains may be appreciable. At the upper levels readers can be seriously handicapped by a meager meaning vocabulary.

Conscientious teachers use many techniques to increase the range of pupils' vocabularies to enable them to read with increasing understanding. At the earlier stages vocabulary growth can be fostered through discussions, through field trips, and through the use of audio-visual aids. At the more advanced levels these techniques are insufficient and other means are added. The study of prefixes, suffixes, and root words can be used effectively to enrich the pupil's meaning vocabulary. This may be carried further to include the etymology of words along with the study of synonyms, antonyms, and pairs of words often confused. These techniques are valuable since they usually familiarize the pupil with a number of related words at the same time.

Some teachers set aside a part of a period daily for the presentation and discussion of new words. The words may be obtained from the regular classroom assignments. They may be difficult words of a general nature, they may be technical terms, or they may be familiar words that have new or peculiar connotations dependent upon the situations in which they are found.

One very essential vocabulary understanding of which every reader should be aware is that individual words do not have any

hard and fast meanings. They acquire meaning from the surrounding context and are interpreted by the reader in the light of his previous experiences. Pupils should be taught to utilize the context as an aid to word meaning. New terms are often defined by the writer, sometimes an easy and familiar synonym is included, or an explanation or other clue may follow a new term. The reader should be sensitized to obtaining meanings this way and checking them in the dictionary if they seem to be hazy and unclear. Therefore, the selection of appropriate definitions in the dictionary is important. Unless the reader can identify the meaning intended by the author, the time spent with the dictionary may be wasted.

A commonly used technique for increasing the range of pupils' vocabularies is to have each pupil keep a word file or notebook. In this he lists all new words encountered in his daily work, together with pronunciations, definitions, explanatory sentences, and any other information to acquaint him thoroughly with the words.

One of the most rewarding ways to increase vocabulary is through extensive reading. The more areas a pupil reads about, the greater the number of ideas and concepts with which he comes in contact. Active listening can help achieve this same end.

All teachers should try to cultivate among pupils at all levels the responsibility for investigating word meanings by such means as asking other people about them, attempting to derive meanings from context, looking them up in the dictionary.

To avoid undue discouragement, the reader should be aware that building an extensive vocabulary is the gradual accumulating of individual word meanings. It is not like many other aspects of reading wherein a principle or skill is learned and then applied to many situations. When a pupil learns one word meaning, he cannot generalize from it. He has merely increased his vocabulary by one word. He must conscientiously follow up words at all times, and gradually his vocabulary expands. There seems to be no short-cut to meeting the vocabulary problem.

Comprehension

The ability to grasp and construe the meaning intended by the author is the most important factor in the reading process since there can be no reason for reading if meaning is not being acquired. To derive the maximum benefits from reading, however, one must do more than secure the surface meaning, the literal interpretation of the words. From the initial stages of reading, pupils should be taught to enter actively into reading and to seek meaning at various depths. First, they should grasp the obvious sense meaning of the

material. If they are to do this, they must be able to identify the main idea and the supporting details, as well as the antecedents and references in a passage. They should be able to respond accurately when questioned: "What does this selection say?"

Next, they should go to a level more penetrating than this and secure the broader meanings inherent but not necessarily stated. This implies the ability to draw conclusions, form generalizations on the basis of specifics, make inferences concerning the writer's purpose or point of view. This kind of reading requires an alert and active thinker.

The reader should do more than passively accept the message or ideas of the author. He should react to them in a critical manner. The good reader constantly evaluates as he reads. At the first-grade level it may be only in terms of: "Is this possible or true?" With increased maturity and skill the questions become more penetrating: "Is the author biased? Are these facts relevant? Is the information accurate? Is the argument complete?" The reader should not be content to agree with the writer without a thorough evaluation.

Going one step further, the good reader integrates the newly acquired ideas with his past experience. The reading of a particular passage makes its impression upon him either by extending his knowledge, alerting his views, or reaffirming them. In any case, the ideas gleaned from the reading become an integral part of the reader.

The intelligent and understanding reader may go through all these steps while he reads; however, he does not do so all the time. All reading does not require such comprehensive analysis. The kind and difficulty of material and the reader's purpose determine how much meaning should be sought from a selection. For some purposes the grasp of the literal meaning is sufficient. However, pupils should be trained to derive understanding at all depths and also be trained to discriminate so that they can read effectively whatever materials they desire.

Rate

When the aforementioned skills are well mastered, rate or speed of reading becomes important. Not only is the good reader skillful in attacking words and interpreting what he reads, but also he can do these things at an efficient rate. This does not mean, however, that he does all his reading at a uniformly rapid pace. Pupils should be taught to develop flexible reading rates. They should read rapidly or slowly as the reading situation requires. They should read

their science texts at a different speed from their English novels and those, in turn, differently from a newspaper account. Here again the difficulty and kind of material combine with the purpose and the skill of the reader to determine appropriate reading speed.

Rate is meaningless except as it refers to speed of appropriate understanding. Therefore, speed practice exercises should be focused specifically on reading at a rate appropriate to the situation, not merely on reading faster. The practice required for increasing rate of reading study-type material should be carried on with study-type material, and recreatory reading speed should be developed by practice on recreatory reading materials. Some exercises should involve skimming to locate specific details ; other exercises, reading as rapidly as possible to grasp the general point of view ; still others, identifying the main idea or supporting facts. Rate tests and timed exercises can be used to encourage more rapid reading. Special films have been designed to accomplish the same purpose. Reading Controllers, Accelerators, and Pacers are also widely used.

The development of adequate reading rates cannot be left to chance. Only through a carefully planned and executed program, supplemented by the reading of much easy and interesting material, will pupils be assured of learning to read efficiently.

In summary, a good reader at the more advanced levels may be described as one who has mastered the mechanics of reading so that he is free to attend to the meaning as he covers the material at a satisfactory rate. He has an extensive sight vocabulary, an enriched stock of word meanings, skill in attacking unfamiliar words effectively, ability to understand material at various depths of interpretation, and ability to adjust rate to his needs. It is the responsibility of teachers at all levels to contribute toward this goal. The reading program should provide guidance, not only for poor readers, but also for the average and superior readers, in order that all may achieve in proportion to their potentialities.

Short Stories Are Not Written; They Are Rewritten

By

ELEANOR A. DAVIS

That short stories are not written but rewritten is the working motto of the journalism classes at York Community High School in Elmhurst, Illinois.

A great deal of the work goes on in committees, and manuscripts do not reach the teacher until they have been rigorously mauled over by a committee. However, there is a basic procedure for all members of the class:

1. After hearing several good character sketches read aloud, we try to see how much we must know about a character before we attempt writing.

We list such headings as

- a. Physical characteristics
- b. Mental characteristics
- c. Character traits
- d. Personality traits
- e. What others think about the character
- f. What his conversation reveals
- g. Typical activities
- h. Interests and hobbies

Other headings the class may add, such as family background, home and school or work environment.

2. Next we attempt a character sketch, long or short as the students choose. This is evaluated in committee before it comes to the teacher.
3. Next we study short stories with an analytical intent:
 - a. We read widely from *Scholastic* Magazine since these stories are of special interest to teen-agers.

Each year some of the best short stories submitted for the "Best Prose" number of the BULLETIN come from the classes of Miss Davis, who is Director of Journalism in York Community High School, Elmhurst. In this article Miss Davis explains how she teaches the writing of a short story.

- b. Students bring in exceptional stories from *Seventeen*, *Collier's*, or any other source they wish.
- c. *The American Magazine* is used to point out the vignette, storiette, and short short.
- d. A short short story of about 1500-1600 words is selected for special study.

Examples: "Love Is Kind of Fragile" by Ross (*Scholastic*, November 14, 1951), or "The Eyes of Mr. Lovides" by Godey (*Literary Cavalcade*, November, 1949), or some story each student may obtain that may be marked.

- e. We underline in colored crayon:
 - One color for dialogue
 - One color for description
 - One color for narrative exposition
- f. We attempt to see how much of a story is devoted to each of these three elements.
- g. Next we analyze the opening scene; the middle section, divided into scenes; the conclusion.
- h. We see thereby that about one fourth to one third of a short story is given over to an opening scene; we note how short the concluding scene is.

4. We next take a story apart from the standpoint of the leading character to ascertain:

- a. What is his dominant trait?
- b. What is his goal or problem?
- c. What obstacles are in his way?
- d. How does he overcome each one?
- e. How does he solve his problem?

Some time is spent on point of view. From whose viewpoint is the story to be written?

5. Now we are ready to write an exciting scene. We try to think of some emotional experience we have had, such as "the most thrilling experience I have ever had." The purpose of this exercise is to reveal that an experience or an incident may be exciting, may be a climax in one's life, but it is *not* a short story.

6. Now we are ready to plot.

- a. Each one selects a character around whom he'd like to build a story. Then he proceeds to learn (or write out) fifty times as much about this character as he will actually use but which he must know if he is going to use him in a story.
 - b. Next we select the goal or problem this character has. We encourage each student to use simple experiences with which each one is familiar: a wish to make a team, have a part in a play, win a scholarship, get a date with a certain somebody, attain parental approval, etc.
 - c. Then we try to plot various obstacles that may confront the character. Many of them come from actual experience. How did you get your father to consent to your buying a strapless formal? How did you win permission to use the family car? How did you overcome your shyness to try out for a play, the band, the school paper?
 - d. Then we have to plan how the character will solve his problem. We try to figure out a new angle, a "trick" to the ending of our story.
7. Now we are ready to try to write an opening scene that will capture our reader's interest in the first thirty to fifty words and will indicate the dominant trait and the problem our hero or heroine faces.

From there on it is just hard work. Students come to realize there is nothing so exhausting as creative writing.

About ten days to two weeks are spent on the preliminaries. From there on, about one day per week is allotted to committee work for about six to eight weeks. In committees the opening scenes are criticized, rewritten, re-criticized, rewritten, etc.

If a student disagrees with the committee's criticism, he asks the instructor for his comments. Many bring in sample scenes for comment before the story as a whole is written.

Many are encouraged to write in first person as if it were a confession story because it is very easy to change to third person later and many beginners get better emotion by using "I." Furthermore, it is a definite help in the problem of sticking to one point of view.

In no other way do I believe beginners can be made to toe the mark on point of view as they do when the story is read to committees. Someone is sure to notice if the point of view is changed.

When a story is completed and if it is at all good, I try to read it to the class. The members are very appreciative, for by now all know how difficult creative writing is. Many never do complete a story, but each one is a better critic of short stories for having the experience. The outstanding writers almost always complete at least one and some students go on to do two or three. Since we offer two years of journalism at York, many of the students take the second year where considerable time is devoted to composition. One or two outstanding writers may try to do a story during the summer vacation and have it ready to "rewrite" after class criticism early in the school year.

Whether our writers win prizes or not, we have a lot of fun trying to "rewrite" short stories and certainly we are more appreciative of what constitutes good writing because of our attempts.

BOOK PARTIES

By HAZEL R. ANDERSON

In my remedial "Reading Skills" course for retarded sophomores I have found Book Parties an interesting way to get everyone to contribute to the class their comments upon the books that each has read. Twice a month these parties are held in the classroom at regular class time. Cookies and cakes are served at a table arranged by a committee from the class. As we eat, we talk about our books. This form of reporting has proved more profitable, more conducive to reading, and certainly more interesting to all the students than formal oral book reports before the class.

Miss Anderson teaches in the Senior High School, Galesburg, Illinois. The editor will welcome other brief "how-we-do-it" articles from any member of the Association.

HOW WELL DO YOUR STUDENTS WRITE?

The January issue of the *Bulletin* will as usual be devoted to some of the best poetry written by Illinois high-school students, and the February issue will contain some of the best prose. You are invited to submit the choicest writing of your students. Please observe the following regulations:

1. Only writing by students enrolled in this current school year should be submitted. Only in very exceptional cases will writing by a 1952 graduate be considered.

2. No more than ten poems or five pieces of prose should be submitted by any one teacher (unless, of course, the selections are in a school magazine which is sent complete).

3. Each group of manuscripts should be accompanied by a statement from the teacher saying that to the best of his knowledge each paper is original.

4. The name of the writer, the name of his high school, the year of his graduation, and the name of his teacher should be plainly indicated *at the bottom* of each manuscript. Please follow this form:

JOHN JONES, Exville H. S., '54
Mary Smith, teacher

This information should also be supplied for each selection in a magazine that is submitted.

5. The deadline for both poetry and prose is December 20, 1952. (Last year some excellent writing came too late to be considered.)

6. No manuscripts will be returned unless accompanied by an addressed envelope with first-class postage attached.

7. Mail the manuscripts to J. N. Hook, 121 Lincoln Hall, Urbana, Illinois.

WHERE WILL YOU BE THANKSGIVING DAY?

Nowhere to go at Thanksgiving? Why not plan to attend the National Council meeting in Boston from November 27 to 29? If you've attended NCTE meetings in the past, you know how rewarding they are. If you haven't attended any, you'll have fun at the convention and come back a better teacher. Since no NCTE meeting will be held in the Midwest before 1954, the Boston meeting is a good one to attend. If you can get there on Wednesday, you can go on conducted tours to Lexington, Concord, and Plymouth Rock. The Hotel Statler is the convention headquarters.